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SOCIALIZATION OF THE MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGE RECITATION

Time was, so we are told, when every little boy and girl had a fearful dread at the thought of the barren spot called school and the scarcely human creature called teacher. I have always suspected that most of the pictures of the pedagogical chambers of horrors were much over-drawn, to say the least; yet it is no doubt true that the movement toward a more wholesome schoolroom atmosphere is comparatively recent in the history of education. With the spread of the belief in the value of interest as an aid to learning—and who now doubts that it is the greatest aid?—and the closely related belief in the value of happiness and the play-spirit, have come many innovations. I can hardly claim as a result of this progressive movement, but I do certainly claim as an accompaniment, the latest step in our educational evolution—the socialized recitation.

To discuss the socialization of the school would lead me too far into the field of educational psychology, but a rather cursory account of my own efforts to socialize the German department is the best original contribution I can offer to the general subject of “Methods in the Teaching of Modern Foreign Languages.”

I shall not at every step point out the reason why, because it is generally too obvious; nor shall I confine myself to what has already been accomplished, because this is a process limited in some respects by available funds, and I prefer to present the ideal toward which my efforts are now being directed.

I. The Recitation Room. The room in which classes in a modern foreign language are held should radiate the atmosphere of the country whose language is being taught there. A map or two; a foreign flag *with* an American flag; the coat-of-arms in color (easily provided by a pupil with some artistic talent); characteristic pictures, not only of prominent persons and places, but masterpieces of the nation's greatest artists as well as famous scenes from opera, drama, and romance. (*Please* remember that Germany has done other things besides fight, that she has *greater* men than war heroes!) Curtains at the windows I hardly dare suggest, because lack of care makes them so unsanitary, but they do certainly make

the room more attractive. Part of the walls covered with burlap for the placing of special pictures which are to be changed with the varying interests of the classes is very desirable. Students should help to collect these pictures; boys in manual training can often make suitable frames for those which are to have a permanent place on the walls. The ones which are to be changed from time to time should be accessible to the students and they themselves should do the changing. A bulletin board is a necessity. Here may be a section devoted to "Germany and the Germans (or any other country) in Current Literature." There will be posted articles from the daily newspapers and references to current magazines and books. Individuals may be asked to be responsible for certain standard magazines, but all will be encouraged to do their own part. (The effect of this on the pupils' general reading as well as the advantage for this particular study is obvious.) Official notices of the German club and announcements of local meetings particularly interesting to students of German will also have a place there.

Well stocked book-shelves with literature of all grades of difficulty will be conspicuous and, most important, easily accessible. A dozen real books that can be handled are far more *inspiring* than a hundred perfectly arranged catalog cards. (A departmental card-catalog is, however, almost a necessity and I do not mean to belittle it.) It is not likely that any of these books will be lost, if the right spirit prevails in the classes, the very spirit for which we are striving. But better lose a few to some moral degenerates than starve eager minds. (I heartily approve of all the modern efforts for the benefit of the sub-normal, but I do often feel that we might give a little more extra attention to the *super-normal*!) The very presence of these additional books, with the incidental allusions to them which can come in so easily, will frequently create a desire for additional reading. Of course there will be a reading-table, on which will be found German periodicals, atlases, dictionaries, grammars, a few books of literary merit, to act as "mental suggestions," which will be frequently interchanged with others on the book-shelves.

In a *German* room, particularly, there ought to be some plants, if possible, and, in fact, anything else which will add to the *distinctive* atmosphere.

A piano is a real acquisition, but not available in most schools. A lantern is not such a remote possibility; a victrola can generally be borrowed for special occasions; and the piano itself can, like the proverbial mountain, be "gone to" whenever it becomes a real necessity, but that is seldom, for no class lacks at least one singer who can give the pitch and carry the air.

The teacher's desk should have, as far as possible, the appearance of a much used library table. It should not be the most conspicuous object in the room, nor should it serve as a barricade—for whose safety, that of pupil or teacher, I have never been able to discover.

If the room is large enough to accommodate the classes, let the chairs be placed, not in stiff rows, but in an incomplete circle around the room. The break will serve as the entrance to the circle and should be so situated that a good bit of blackboard will be available which can be seen by all the class. (This is not so important as it might seem at first thought, for chairs can be moved easily, whenever more pupils are desired at the board, or whenever some of the class cannot see the work.) I realize that an objection to this method of seating a class lies in the fact that more room is needed; but even with two rows of chairs I like it much better than the stiff, formal school-room. To be sure, it does encourage informality in the classroom, but that is just what we desire. It does not encourage disorder—nothing does, but lack of interest.

II. The Recitation. Of course the teacher becomes a part of the circle. Forced conversation can never be quite natural, but it approaches that desirable state in the circle. Conversation and drill games can be played with all the freedom of the kindergarten. The *pupils* carry on as much of the recitation as they possibly can. Naturally, the teacher must direct, and there are many occasions when valuable time would be lost if the questioning, particularly the development of a new point, were entrusted even to a very good pupil; but review work, especially remote review; the little games, reviews in near-disguise; continuous reading with the correction of mistakes; all can go on with practically no dictation from the teacher. A splendid spirit is quite noticeable in every class so conducted.

Once in a given number of weeks, perhaps once a month, such a class may be given *carte blanche* to prepare for the lesson period.

An individual, or, better, a small group, may be given the responsibility. Anniversaries of births or deaths of celebrities, and other memorable events furnish fitting occasions. At such times competent townspeople, other members of the faculty, advanced students, and, probably best of all, members of the class furnish a program. To be of value, it must, of course, be well prepared beforehand; but it should be of the kind which does *not* require many rehearsals. The work of the students should be spontaneous and within the range of their powers: recitations of poems and short prose selections; expressive reading of interesting and easy stories; oral topics in the mother tongue, or very simple ones in the foreign tongue, concerning the occasion; lantern slides; music; and dramatization, whenever something appropriate can be found, as at Christmas, etc. Such events create a wholesome esprit de corps, require purely voluntary additional work, and keep the human, humanistic, side of the study prominently before the minds of the whole department, and, indeed, of the whole school. Often one class entertains another class on such occasions, and that gives an added incentive to the careful preparation of the work. It also helps to carry out the social idea of the department.

III. Conclusion. Let no one say that time spent on such activities is wasted. (I thoroughly believe that *all* departments of a good school should work together to bring out—educate—certain desirable qualities in the students. Among these are, in the front rank, initiative and self-reliance. Both of these attributes and others, are developed by the socialized recitation. Can we spare the time from the teaching of German? Not *from* the teaching of German, perhaps, but *in* the teaching of German, certainly. I do not care to be a teacher unless I can be also an educator. But if we feel that we are fulfilling our highest mission when we cover well the greatest possible amount of ground in our chosen subject, and generally that is about all we can consciously attempt and conscientiously perform, we still have a place for the socialized recitation, and in it we shall find our strongest ally. Really valuable information is gleaned casually, more by some than by others, to be sure, but no doubt by those who can best assimilate it; desire to do well and to gain greater mastery of the language for further efforts becomes keen; interest in everything which concerns “our” study is quickened; a large amount of extra work is done uncon-

sciously and therefore with a minimum of fatigue; opportunities are sometimes given in this way for the slower pupils to make up their back work while the brighter ones are preparing some special 'stunt,' and thus neither group loses out at all. Again to revert, perhaps to the idealistic, the points of contact between the pupils and the foreigners are multiplied; the horizon of all is broadened.

Surely every teacher of foreign languages should be full of the spirit of cosmopolitanism. If anything will bring this war-laden world to its senses, sane education ought to do it. It can. And no one has a greater opportunity, and therefore a greater duty than the teacher of modern foreign languages, to impress the need and the real possibility of the spirit of universal brotherhood. Everyone must do it in his own way, but for me the *best* way is that which vitalizes all that is best in the civilization of the foreign people, makes the foreigners live as citizens of the *world*, members of the great human family, of which we, too, are but a part.

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